

# The Circuit Writer



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## PUERA ROBISON: NEW JERSEY'S FIRST WOMAN TO BE ORDAINED, 1924

by The Reverends Fran and Bill Noll  
with special thanks for research information to Bruce and  
Ginena Wills, Ruth Scarborough, and Anna Sutton Hutchinson

Her name and deeds have been largely forgotten over the years, but Puera B. Robison holds title to a notable "first" in the annals of Methodism in New Jersey. In 1925, her picture was featured in the Christian Advocate (in the April 2 issue) and her achievement was even headlined in the New York Times (March 27, page 9). For in that year Rev. Robison was ordained a deacon by the Newark Conference (predecessor to our Northern New Jersey Conference) and became the first woman "anywhere in the East" to be ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Methodist Episcopal Church opened the door to the ministry of women in 1924. At the General Conference that year the overwhelmingly male delegates voted to allow for women's ordination but refused to provide for their election as ministerial members of annual conferences. Then, as now, a conference member was virtually guaranteed a pastoral appointment if requested. The delegates reportedly feared that their appointments could not always be made.

Puera herself apparently sought no such appointment. From 1922 to 1927 she was a member of the faculty at Centenary Collegiate Institute (now Centenary College) in Hackettstown. There she taught Bible and Secretarial Studies as well as the "Standard Training Course in Religious Education" which was given at area churches. Anna Sutton Hutchinson of Delaware, N.J., studied with the Rev. Miss Robison at Trinity Church in Hackettstown fifty-three years ago. Anna remembers her as a "brilliant person, but lovely and pleasant - never cross." In the Centenary yearbook, The Hack, students in 1924 described how "Miss Robison - stern but square, instructs us thoroughly with care."

Records at Centenary indicate that Miss Robison, while still on the faculty, was also continuing her studies at Crozier Theological Seminary, a Baptist school near Philadelphia. According to the New York Times she spent her summers working "among the mountain whites of the South." She sought ordination because missionaries in Appalachia were scarce and she hoped that ordination would make her more useful in that field. The Times gives her age as "about thirty."

The Christian Advocate contains information on Puera Robison's earlier career:

Miss Robison is from Liverpool, Perry County, Pa., where for three years she was engaged in rural work. She also served as corresponding and statistical secretary of the Perry County Sabbath School Association, having direct charge of all district and county work and institutes. From 1910 to 1918 she taught in the primary school in Liverpool. Her next connection was at Williamsport, Pa., where she supervised the Junior School and

Americanization work at Williamsport-Dickinson Seminary and also became a member of the faculty as Bible instructor. A year as method instructor in the School of Religious Education at Williamsport followed.

The Rev. Robison held an M.E.L. degree from Temple University and also studied at Pennsylvania Business College.

Puera Robison's name was presented for ordination at the sixty-eighth session of the Newark Annual Conference held at St. Luke's Church in Newark. On Thursday, March 26, 1925, she was elected deacon along with three male local preachers. The minutes of the conference session report that: "On motion of H. B. Leech the election of Miss Robison, the first woman to come before the Newark Conference, was by a standing vote." (1925 Newark Annual Conference Journal, page 16.) She was ordained on Sunday, March 29, by Bishop Luther B. Wilson.

The later career of Rev. Robison is unknown. Her name remained on the conference role of local preachers as a local deacon until 1927. That year her address was listed as Lima, N. Y. Anyone with further information on Miss Robison is asked to contact the writers of this article.

#### PROMINENT CLERGYMAN LIES IN IRVINGTON CEMETERY GRAVE

A Methodist clergyman, considered the person most responsible for Drew University's location in Madison instead of Perth Amboy, is buried in Irvington's Clinton Cemetery, according to Alan A. Siegel, president of the Irvington Historical Society.

Siegel said that the historic importance of the Rev. James M. Tuttle, whose body was interred in the local cemetery in 1887, was unknown until two months ago when The Star-Ledger carried a story about a 134-year-old friendship quilt donated to Drew University's National Methodist Museum by Tuttle's great niece. Siegel said he contacted Tuttle's 92-year-old descendant, Helen Barnes of Convent Station, and Dr. Kenneth Rowe, Drew University Methodist librarian, to piece together Tuttle's biography.

Born in Caldwell in 1809, Tuttle worked as a blacksmith from the time he was 10 until his conversion to Methodism at the age of 24. A year later he was licensed to preach, beginning a career that took him to Flemington, Dover, Jersey City, Bordentown, Belleville, Hackettstown, Trenton, Madison, Rahway and other posts in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. During the Civil War, Tuttle served as secretary of the New Jersey Sanitary Commission from 1864 to 1865. At other times he was active in fund-raising and missionary work for the Methodist Church.

Tuttle's involvement with Drew University was a case of being in the right place at the right time, Siegel said. Daniel Drew, the New York philanthropist whose generosity led to the founding of what began as a Methodist seminary and is now one of New Jersey's largest private colleges, at first suggested a site in upper New York State. After much investigation, Drew's trustees were about to purchase a tract in Perth Amboy when suddenly, in June, 1867, they opted instead for a 225-acre estate in Madison known as "The Forest," once the home of William Gibbons, a wealthy landowner. Tuttle was assigned to the church in Madison at the time, lived in the Gibbons mansion and was a close associate of Dr. John McClintock, Drew's first president. It was Tuttle who first brought the advantages of "The Forest" to McClintock's attention. McClintock in turn persuaded Drew and the other trustees to purchase the estate.

Tuttle, who served as a trustee of Drew University until his death and was noted for his sonorous voice and lengthy but powerful sermons, died in Spring Lake on

November 22, 1837. His wife, Margaret Dickerson, and their children, Adrianna, James W. Harrison, Allie, Mary and James P., are buried in Clinton Cemetery.

#### HISTORIC QUILT REAPPEARS IN FABRIC OF DREW UNIVERSITY LIFE

Currently blanketing the nation, a quilt-making craze represents the modern revival of a craft into which Americans have always woven the threads of national character.

Drew University was beautifully reminded of that recently when a "friendship quilt", made in 1845 for a founding trustee and his wife, went on display in the University Library. It was loaned (permanently, we hope) by 92-year-old Helen Barnes of Convent Station, a descendant not only of the trustee, James M. Tuttle, a noted Methodist preacher in his day, but of another Methodist clergyman, Charles Randall Barnes, who was a member of Drew's original faculty in 1867.

Made of milk-white muslin and in a near-perfect state of preservation, the comforter is king-sized, nearly nine feet on each side. It consists of 49 squares, mostly floral in design, each made and signed by a different family in Tuttle's Belleville parish.

#### CELEBRATING THE HERITAGE

- HAVERSTRAW Records of this historic congregation which dates from 1799 have been recently microfilmed by the Historical Society of Rockland County under the direction of Mr. Daniel deNoyelles, descendant of a founding family, and the Rev. David Montanye. Original copies of trustee records, membership lists, along with records of baptisms and marriages have been deposited for safe keeping in the Northern New Jersey Conference Collection in the Drew University Library.
- HOPATCONG Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe of Drew University addressed the first fall meeting of the United Methodist Women of West Side Church on the struggle for women's ordination in the Methodist Church Monday, September 17.
- LOWER  
BERKSHIRE  
VALLEY This congregation celebrated the 80th anniversary of the dedication of their current building. However, the history of the church dates even earlier than the 1899 cornerstone. It was between 1865 and 1871 that the Rev. Absalom Steelman, a Methodist circuit rider, recorded in his autobiography an account of the first regular religious services held in this community. At the recent anniversary service, the Rev. Steelman's great-granddaughter took part. Mrs. Bertha Johnson Palmer read an excerpt from her great-grandfather's autobiography telling of his experiences in the Valley.
- MORRISTOWN Morristown Methodists have reached another milestone in their journey through time. Records and memorabilia have been chronologically filed, indexed and cross-referenced. These records have been microfilmed with copies now stored in Drew University and the Morristown-Morris Township libraries. Artifacts have been inventoried and a permanent display prepared as well as changing displays of historical interest and value. The Morristown Church is a Northern New Jersey Conference Historical Site as of 1966 (its original structure having been dedicated in 1827) with many records and memorabilia intact in spite of the disastrous fire of 1972. "We are proud to share in preserving our Methodist roots," writes Mrs. Elva D. Zeliff, Church Historian.

PERTH AMBOY Simpson United Methodist Church has been placed on the state and national register of historic buildings. A service of celebration of this event was held on Sunday afternoon, October 28. Although the cornerstone was laid in 1866 the building was not completed until 1881. The tower of the church houses the town clock which the city fathers placed there shortly after the church was completed. The clock is clearly seen by the boats of the harbor.

SUFFERN, Wesley Chapel is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year. Bishop N.Y. C. Dale White and Northern District Superintendent Robert Grant led the congregation in an anniversary worship service on July 22.

LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY CONTEST - Awards to be presented during 1980 Conference

Two local churches - Finesville and Perth Amboy, have submitted histories of their churches published during the calendar year 1979 for our seventh annual LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY RECOGNITION CONTEST. Awards will be presented during the 1980 meeting of the Annual Conference in June.

If your church has published a history of your local church in 1979, we urge you to enter it in this year's contest now. Large or small, pamphlet or cloth bound, mimeographed or printed, all histories printed during 1979 are eligible. Each history will become part of the Conference's permanent collection. MAIL ONE COPY TO: Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, N.J. 07940 by February 1, 1980.

RETIRED PASTORS

Have you made your tape of reminiscences and your very best sermon for the Conference Archives? If not, contact the Rev. Paul Spiecker, Clifton, for details. Phone: 684-4816.

TRAVELING EXHIBIT ON BISHOP FRANCIS ASBURY

A small exhibit of Asbury memorabilia from the collection of Drew University is available on request for use at special celebrations in local churches. The exhibit includes several mounted prints and photographs, a set of ordination certificates signed by our first Bishop, along with a pair of spectacles he wore. When used with historical items from a local congregation, this makes an attractive addition to an anniversary or other historical observation. Contact Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, N.J. 07940. Telephone: 377-3000, Ext. 470.

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